DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 182 CS 210 769

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TITLE Making T. S. Eliot Easier: Images as the Key to Understanding.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Greater St. Louis and Missouri Association of Teachers of English (St. Louis, MO, April 24-27, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Instruction; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship; Visual Aids
IDENTIFIERS *Eliot (T S)

ABSTRACT

Secondary school teachers of English often avoid teaching T.S. Eliot's poetry because they consider his work too difficult for young readers and too full of esoteric allusions. However, at the heart of his work is a variety of rich, concrete images which can be used to reveal his meaning and which can be offered to students in the form of drawings or images on an overhead projector. Teachers can readily adapt Eliot's "The Hollow Men" to this method by drawing "death's dream kingdom," consisting of three scarecrows slumped together, followed by a rat walking over shards of glass, cacti, and a fading star. Teachers, following the poem, can then draw "death's other kingdom," represented by a rose, sunlight on a broken column, a tree, and people singing. Teachers can further distinguish the two halves of the picture by explaining the history of Guy Fawkes, the failed English revolutionary and Joseph Conrad's character Kurtz from "The Heart of Darkness" who together form the keynote of the poem, and placing their names in the appropriate portions of the picture. The vivid images offered in a visual, rather than written, context can help students comprehend Eliot's nightmare vision of the world, and his preference for evil, violent figures who see the world as it is rather than the nondescript, silent majority who populate the twentieth century wasteland. Such a concrete, accessible method also works with Eliot's other poems for example "Prufrock," the "Quartets," and "The Wasteland." (A copy of "The Hollow Men" and sample drawings are included.) (JC)

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July, 1987

Making T. S. Eliot Easier:

Images as the Key to Understanding

High school teachers often avoid T. S. Eliot because they consider him too difficult and intellectual, too full of allusions and too esoteric for the understanding of adolescent literary scholars. And indeed, much of Eliot's power and all of his mystique lie in his somewhat cryptic allusions to little-known mythologies and his very personal symbolism. Nonetheless, at the heart of Eliot's poetry is a very real imagism; his message is conveyed first and primarily by images of concrete, imaginable objects placed in an easily imagined landscape. It is to this imagist aspect of Eliot that we must turn if we are to understand him clealy and if we are to teach him at all.

"The Hollow Men" (1925) is a perfect example of an Eliot puzzle, easily solved if we look first and foremost to the actual images called up by the text. In teaching the poem, teachers could use an easel or blackboard, overhead or mural and actually draw each visual image as it comes up and thus develop the picture the poem makes (refer throughout this discussion to the model drawing in Appendix). On its own, this picture, once completed, will reveal the meaning of the poem because Eliot's message is primarily one of portraits. He reveals his philosophy and his moral universe by showing us the world as he sees it, peopled with the characters of a nightmare and landscaped with the objects of a wasteland. But we must carefully

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attend to the images Eliot calls up and just as carefully make note of them in a drawing so that we can get a clear picture of his created world and thus a clear idea of his message.

"The Hollow Men" begins with two allusions--one literary, one historical. The name Kurtz from Conrad's Heart of Darkness calls up a strongly built, dark-eyed devil of immense power and unlimited capacity for action. Against this type is cast the pathetic figure of Guy Fawkes, the unsuccessful revolutionary of the infamous Gunpowder Plot which failed to blow up the Parliament and resulted in the death of its instigator, Fawkes. To this day in Britain, on Guy Fawkes Day, children travel door to door with little effigies of "the Old Guy" hung from sticks; they beg for candy for the sake of the great ineffectual majority of us whose dreams of making our mark on this earth fizzle in the weakness of our own wills. These two images form the basis of an extended contrast which provides a two-part structure for the geography of the poem. In order to help students visualize the image of Kurtz, teachers might use pictures of powerfully built men like Arnold Schwartzeneger and Sylvester Stallone. For Guy Fawkes, a real doll effigy could be used to show the frailty of the character Eliot intends for us to imagine. Once these contrasting figures are presented, the poem proceeds with a description of the title characters, the hollow men.

"Hollow . . . stuffed . . . leaning together, headpiece filled with straw"--these initial images tell us that the hollow men are scarecrows, not put on stakes as backbones, but leaned together for strength, with no fiber of power and only the flexibility of each against the other as a common brace. These creatures have "dried voices" which "whisper together," sounding like "wind in dry grass/ Or

rats' feet over broken glass/ In our dry cellar." The sensory images are both visual and aural and we picture the desolation of this dry, wasted land.

In the third stanza, the narrator begins his presentation of the geography of the poem as he introduces another set of characters: "Those who have crossed/ With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom." These inhabitants of Eliot's landscape have crossed something: this something is the first indicator of his geography and marks a division between one world and the next. These inhabitants have "direct eyes," which suggests that the eyes of the hollow men are not direct, if indeed they exist at all. Similarly, by default, if this second land is "death's other Kingdom," the first land--the wasted land of the hollow men--must also be death's Kingdom. And so it is, for we find in Section II that it is called "death's dream Kingdom."

The geography of the dream kingdom is further outlined in Section II where we find that "eyes . . . do not appear" in this dream Kingdom, but that in death's other Kingdom, "there, the eyes are/ Sunlight on a broken column/ There, is a tree swinging/ And voices are in the wind's singing/ More distant and more solemn/ Then a fading star." Note here the many positive images of radiance, strength, vitality, and beauty. The contrast between the whispers of Section I and the singing in Section II, the contrast between the direct eyes and the eyes which "do not appear," between the sunlight and the fading star, between "lost violent souls" and "hollow men" create a dichotomous landscape which teachers can easily draw and which students can then clearly see. The image of the scarecrow in Section II ("crowskin, crossed staves") assures us that our original drawing in Section I was correct. "There, the eyes are" reassures us that our

idea of no eyes in the dream kingdom and direct eyes in the other (or "twilight") kingdom was correct.

In Section III, we get more concrete information about Eliot's wasteland. Cactus grow in "the dead land." "Stone images/ Are raised . . . Under the twinkle of a fading star." And the narrator questions whether things are "like this/ In death's other kingdom." We can say, "No," because we have a clear image of the other kingdom: we know that the people in it are vital, powerful, and lucid, not "trembling;" they are "singing" near "a broken column," not "form[ing] prayers to broken stone" like those in death's dream kingdom.

Section IV once again assures us that "the eyes are not here" and that the cactus land is a "valley of dying stars," and we can check our drawing by these images. The "broken jaw" of dead animals (and of the silent, whispering scarecrows) completes the desert image. In this section, the sightless people "grope together" as they leaned together in Section I; they "avoid speech" and gather "on this beach of the tumid river." Now we can clearly visualize the division between the two kingdoms: what has been "crossed" by those "with direct eyes" is a river. And the "hollow men" remain "sightless, unless/ The eyes reappear." These eyes, we are told, are like "the perpetual star/ Multifoliate rose/ Of death's twilight kingdom." And so we place a rose in the vital landscape of death's other kingdom and we are done with the picture.

In the final Section, V, we find a group of hollow men meaninglessly circling a cactus ("the prickly pear"). These men are attempting a mass of sorts which can be sung to a Gregorian chant: "Between the idea/ And the reality . . . Falls the Shadow." They attempt to pray the Protestant ending of the Lord's Prayer. They say

under their breaths that "life is very long." And unable to pray or to face the seemingly unending emptiness of their existences, they conclude that the end of things will not be a violent, direct "bang," but a vicarious, pathetic "whimper."

A careful look at what we have drawn can tell us the point Eliot is making: as beings of the modern world, we have two options--living death or actual death. We may lead the life of the zombie or the other life (whatever it may be). These options are represented by the keynote allusionary figures and by the two kingdoms described in the poem. Clearly, Eliot prefers evil, violent figures who see things as they are to the nondescript, silent majority who populate the twentieth century Wasteland. But just as clearly, the hollow man (who narrates the poem) prefers his blindness to "the horror" of sight suggested by Conrad in the character of Kurtz. The hollow men cannot commit themselves to anything. They can neither devote themselves to their wornout religious rituals of the past nor to existential self-seeking. Rather than break the columns of organized conventions, they embrace their broken stone, and in the final stanza they attempt to formulate new rituals. But these are as meaningless as and even more absurd than their old ones. Their only hope for vitality is the revelation of those with direct eyes who, like a perpetual star or an eternally blooming rose, could provide sight. But these hollow men cannot bear to meet those eyes, cannot bear to see the truth of their emptiness, cannot face that dreadful realization of what they are even for the chance to be something better.

In addition to this secular reading of the poem, "The Hollow Men" can also be read as a conversion poem. Written on the eve of Eliot's conversion in 1928, it seems to be looking toward a more genuine,

living faith of sunlight and singing and turning its back on stone images which "receive/ The supplication of a dead man's hand." And the unwillingness to commit to the new faith or to embrace the old is the narrator's dilema. The last section strongly alludes to the Roman Catholic mass and to the protestant Lord's Prayer. But these readings are dependent on knowledge about Eliot's biography and teachers should not present those biographical details nor lead students to these interpretations until after the poem is understood on the textual level.

This process of making Eliot concrete and comprehensible also works for "Prufrock" and the "Quartets." It works for the Sweeney poems and for "Ash Wednesday." For The Wasteland, teachers would need colored chalk or crayons because of the colorful array of images in that piece. All of his poems benefit from this concrete treatment, and all of them have a clear tale to tell if we attend to the images and examine the portrait they paint. All in all, Eliot is more teachable than many of us might have suspected, but his poetry requires a concrete approach to make its meaning clear. And this concrete approach not only makes Eliot more teachable, but also makes his poetry more accessible to our students.

THE HOLLOW MEN

1925

[illegible]

The Hollow Men

A penny for the Old Guy

I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together,
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer—

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.
Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone

At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

V

Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

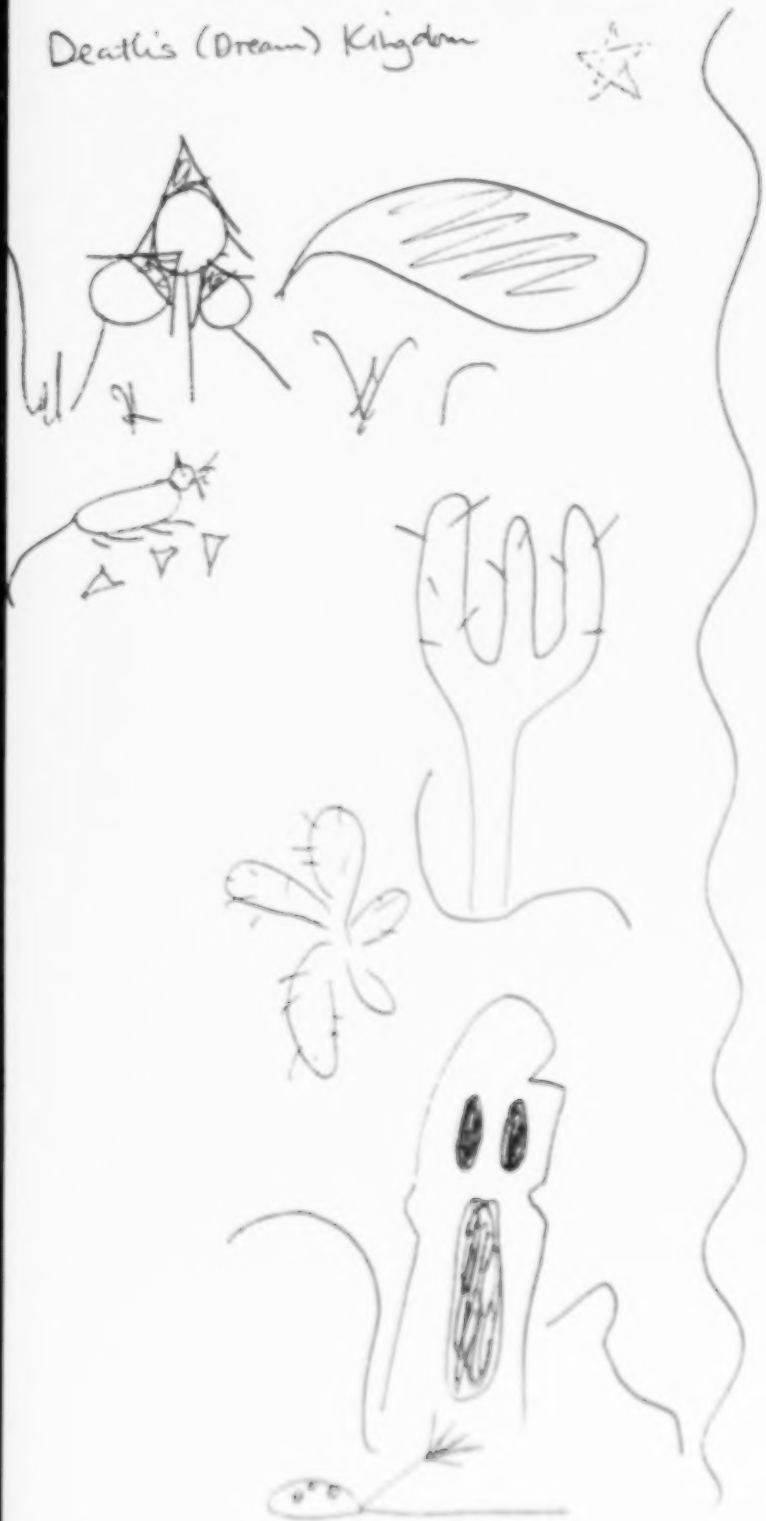
For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

Appendix

Fawkes

Death's (Dream) Kingdom



Kurtz

Death's Other Kingdom
(Twilight)